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Developments in Indochina

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State Dept. review completed

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DEVELOPMENTS IN INDOCHINA

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The Buddhists
are having problems among themselves.

LAOS

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The Communists have rebuffed an effort by Vang Pao to reinforce units near the Plaine des Jarres. Souvanna consults the King about the make-up of a new cabinet. Lao Army generals are organizing for political competition with the Communists.

SOUTH VIETNAM

Some exchange of artillery fire continues along the western Thach Han River defense line.

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Buddhist Internal Divisions

The An Quang Buddhists are facing increased problems among themselves brought on by the cease-fire. According to the US Embassy, there are persistent rumors of such difficulties, related to personal and regional rivalries and to differing views on the sect's role in the coming months. The Buddhists recently issued an innocuous action program for the post - cease-fire period, calling on the faithful to restore war-damaged pagodas, assist war victims, defend moral values, and restore the faith of the young. The non-controversial agenda could mean that An Quang leaders were unable to agree on any politically oriented activities, although many of them still believe the Buddhists should carefully avoid a partisan cast.

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An Quang leaders are continuing their efforts to work for the release of Buddhist political prisoners as part of the cease-fire agreement, but the moderates and the militants of the sect apparently are each going their separate ways. [redacted]

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[redacted] the moderates have established a "committee for the relief of prisoners," which will seek the release of Buddhists held both by Saigon and by the Viet Cong. The moderates plan to move cautiously in their dealings with the Viet Cong to avoid arousing the suspicions of the government. Some An Quang leaders who are strongly anti-government, however, are working in a rival committee concerned exclusively with prisoners held by Saigon.

An Quang's attitude toward the government's popular front may have been another bone of contention. Four Buddhist senators attended the front's initial organizational meeting, and subsequently indicated their interest in cooperating with the new group. The An Quang religious hierarchy apparently vetoed Buddhist participation, however, and the senators were not present at the front's public inauguration.

The recent deaths of An Quang's titular head plus one of the leading active monks may contribute to internal divisions. The deaths create a vacuum that may encourage internal struggling for position.

Personal rivalries and policy differences are not new to the An Quang movement. In recent years, however, under Tri Quang's dominance, An Quang has been able to patch over its differences and follow a relatively moderate course, avoiding confrontations with the government and keeping its opposition activities within the system. Tri Quang may prove able to impose his will on the contending An Quang elements, but the atmosphere of more intensive political struggle between the Thieu government and Communists could put greater pressure on the Buddhists and increase the likelihood of an open split among them. [redacted]

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LAOS

Combat increased slightly on 7 March in the north. Communist units sharply rebuffed an effort by General Vang Pao to reinforce units southeast of the Plaine des Jarres. Ground attacks supported by heavy weapons fire scattered elements of three government battalions immediately after they were airlifted to high ground not far from Route 4.

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Political Ducks Still Not in Line

With the deadline for the formation of a new government approaching, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma is preparing to visit the royal capital of Luang Prabang to discuss the future cabinet with the King. Souvanna particularly would like to retain the ministries of defense and interior. The Communists probably also covet these positions, but they have not yet staked any open claims to them or to any other cabinet portfolios.

The joint commissions that are to work out the arrangements for implementing other provisions of the peace agreement met again on 8 March. The military commission surmounted earlier disagreement on procedural points and began discussing the mechanics of supervising the cease-fire. Little substantive progress was reported by the political commission, which is attempting to draft a protocol dealing with the Joint National Political Council. Second-ranked Communist negotiator Phoune Sipraseuth, who returned to Vientiane on 8 March, may have new instructions for the Communist representatives that will enable them to be more forthcoming.

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The Generals Plan for the Future

During a convocation in Vientiane on 28 February, Lao Army generals displayed a more realistic appraisal of what should be done to compete politically with the Communists. The generals agreed that Prime Minister Souvanna should form a single political party to represent all non-Communist factions and thus prevent a split in the pro-government vote in future elections. In addition, they recommended that Souvanna send intelligent, young organizers into the provinces to assist local chiefs in rallying support for the government.

The generals also urged that corrupt civil administrators be cashiered, and talked about curbing the more blatant forms of military malfeasance. Since the generals apparently did not set forth any specific anti-corruption programs, however, it is likely that few of them will make any real effort to clean house. Still, the military leaders' recognition that they must improve their images and shun factionalism should be at least temporarily encouraging to Souvanna.

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